

Representative

Jeannie
DARNEILLE

27th District

2004 Session Report



Dear Neighbors,

First, let me say that it has been an honor and a privilege to serve as your State Representative in the 27th Legislative District. I have come to rely on many of you, as well as my colleagues in the Legislature, as sources of inspiration and knowledge.

My commitment to the children, families and communities of the 27th has kept me focused through four sessions now, including a short but extremely intense sixty-day session that just ended. This session represented the second year in a biennial budget process that began with an economic downturn and an enormous deficit. You may recall that in order to turn our state's economy around, the Legislature provided billions of dollars worth of tax exemptions to Boeing and other high-tech industries in the budget voted on in 2003.

Unfortunately, while the legislature handed out these exemptions and others, the budget needed to be balanced, and that meant cuts to health care for 20,000 children, refusing to fully fund two education initiatives supported by the voters, and increasing tuition at our institutions of higher education.

What was markedly different in 2004 was the relief we provided to those most affected by the economic downturn – Washington's workers and their families. Led by the Washington CARES Task Force (CARES = Compassion, Accountability, Reform, and Economic Security), House Democrats focused their energy and commitment on restoring many of the cuts made to health care last year, working to reform the way state government provides for the well-being of Washington residents in the future. **I am proud to serve as the Chair of this task force and am pleased we were able to achieve several task force goals this session.** Here, you will find some of what I consider the highlights of the 2004 session, as well as information on how you can stay in touch with me to make sure your voice is heard in Olympia.

Sincerely,


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Health Care

Washington's health care system was severely affected by challenges of recent years, as low-income families, employers of low-wage workers, and the health insurers looked to the state for a lifeline. Because health care costs are such a significant part of the state budget, all citizens, as taxpayers, were affected. Due to cuts in last year's budget, 20,000 children in low-income families were affected by loss of health care coverage.

I worked to restore those cuts this year, and along with colleagues in the House Democratic Caucus, was successful in keeping full Medicaid eligibility for kids in families at or below 150% of poverty level. We successfully blocked efforts by the Senate to require premium co-pays for *all* participating families, even those far below the federal poverty level. Other successes included funding increases for the community clinics and hospitals that provide health care to uninsured or under-insured persons in our state and the approval of the home care workers' contract that will ensure quality in-home care for the disabled and elderly in our state.

Reducing health care costs was the topic of hot debate during the legislative session. You've heard a lot about tort reform and caps on damages awarded by juries to people bringing civil suits against health care providers. House Democrats led the way in addressing this issue, passing seven bills dealing with issues like addressing liability in cases where more than one party is at fault, reducing frivolous cases, establishing time limits to file actions for injury or death, and establishing a task force on medical malpractice dispute resolution alternatives. All, unfortunately, died in the Senate, which passed only a bill dealing with a cap on damages.



Children's Services

The health, safety and best interest of children remained a top priority for House Democrats in the 2004 Session. House Democrats developed and championed a family-friendly Washington CARES agenda focused on preserving the state's fragile safety net.

Through a combination of policy changes and funding priorities, House Democrats were successful in making positive changes in the lives of vulnerable children and struggling families all across the state. We focused on reducing hunger in the state, increasing access to civil legal defense for low-income persons, improving the status of children in the state's care, and increasing safety and economic security for victims of domestic violence around the state.

Other Important Items for Children and Families Included in the Budget:

Along with the other members of the CARES Task Force, my colleagues and I made sure the Legislature would not leave those most affected by our economic downturn behind – the families that go without the care, services, and even food they need, and especially the children that often bear the largest burden when times are tough.

We pushed to include \$1 million in the budget for high school transition programs for students graduating with developmental disabilities. Getting through the school system is just one challenge these individuals have – they and their families are often in need of assistance finding housing and a positive workplace where they can contribute.

Recognizing the importance of a healthy body as well as mind, the budget also funded one of my major priorities, the 2004 Act for Hungry Families.

This new legislation will require school lunches for low-income kids and greater food stamp eligibility for needy families. The ramifications of this legislation won't make any headlines, but will make a huge difference in the lives of many struggling children and elderly. In a state with one of the highest percentages of per capita incomes, Washington has ranked 5th or higher for hunger for nearly a decade. We can't expect children to succeed in school if their basic needs are not met. We will continue to work to establish a full range of school and summer nutrition programs to achieve education reform goals in Washington.



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Our Commitment to Students

There's a lot of talk about improving the business climate in our state, but jobs won't matter unless we have a progressive education system. We must provide greater access and funding for both K-12 and higher education in Washington to ensure that new business development and innovation continue to generate economic growth in the future. I have advocated for greater invest-



ments and reforms of our Public Education system, including an analysis of potential district consolidation.

We accomplished some great reforms for K-12 education this year. An important fix to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test will allow students to retake the test up to four times and bank scores for sections they have passed. In addition, school districts that are successful at raising student achievement on test scores won't lose the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding, while struggling districts will still receive the targeted funding and technical assistance they need.

Furthermore, school districts can now collect the full amount of levies approved by their own voters. By allowing them to expand the levy funding base, the schools will receive more of the money promised them.

I was disappointed that the Legislature approved a measure to allow the formation of a limited number of charter schools. I believe charter schools will divert money away from existing public schools that are already struggling for funding. I am hopeful however, that charter schools will follow strict accountability measures and school board oversight.



Higher Education

The Legislature gave our colleges and universities an additional \$10 million and increased financial aid for college students by \$7 million so our students can receive the quality education they need to land jobs in the 21st century economy.

- \$10 million in the budget to pay for 3,000 more enrollments at our colleges and universities.
- \$7 million in enrollments so more students can earn degrees in high-demand fields like nursing, computer science, and biotech.
- \$4.3 million in the budget for more Promise Scholarships so students can afford to attend college.
- \$117 million in improvements to higher education facilities are included in the capital budget.

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Addressing Domestic Violence

Last spring the Crystal Brame tragedy opened our eyes to the threat of domestic violence, especially among law enforcement personnel. The reaction to her death prompted concerned citizens to reexamine law enforcement policies when dealing with one of their own accused of spousal abuse.



The Legislature worked together to pass new requirements for law enforcement agencies, implementing a new set of guidelines to address domestic violence, as well as re-

stricting police officers from carrying a weapon in a courtroom when involved in the allegations. The package of legislation also allows victims of domestic violence to terminate rental agreements without paying additional rent and prohibits landlords from evicting or refusing to rent to them. In addition, I worked hard to assure that the final supplemental budget included \$2 million for domestic violence shelters. These steps ensure that we remove any barriers preventing victims of domestic violence from escaping the abuse.

Tax Relief for Seniors

Our state's senior citizens – especially those living on fixed incomes — often find it hard to make ends meet. They should not be forced out of their homes because they cannot afford rising property taxes. The Legislature was able to expand senior property-tax relief to an additional 40,000 retirees by increasing the eligibility from \$30,000 to \$35,000. Seniors will also be allowed to deduct their Medicare insurance costs when calculating their eligibility. This legislation is the first expansion of senior property-tax relief in Washington State since 1998, when the current \$30,000 eligibility ceiling was enacted.



Relief for families affected by the war in Iraq

I sponsored a trio of bills in 2004 to provide assistance for families in our community who experience the challenges associated with the massive call-up and deployment of military personnel from Washington. While only one measure passed through the legislative process – establishing a moratorium on foreclosures of mortgages and deeds of trust and eliminating penalties on delinquent property taxes – we will continue to examine the needs of families of National Guard and Reserve families in our community.

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